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How to Do Justice to Media Specificity

—Or, Should This Video Be Left to Speak for Itself?

Clare Birchall, Peter Woodbridge & Gary Hall

Liquid Theory TV is a series of IPTV programmes produced as part of a collaboration between Clare Birchall, Peter Woodbridge and Gary Hall. IPTV, in its broadest sense, refers to technologies which use computer networks to deliver audio-visual programming. *The Post-Secret State: Openness and Transparency in the Era of Gov 2.0* is the third episode in the series. The previous episodes are *Liquid Theory TV* (Hall, Birchall & Woodbridge, 2009) and *Deleuze's 'Postscript on the Societies of Control'* (Hall, Birchall & Woodbridge, 2010).

A stress on the importance of focusing on the specificity of different technologies has been a crucial feature of many theoretical engagements with new media.¹ In this context few advocates of media specificity can claim to having been as intellectually rigorous over as extended a period of time as Mark Poster. In his latest writing on the specificity of networked computing—an introduction to two recently translated volumes by the relatively unknown media theorist Vilém Flusser—Poster explains that, somewhat surprisingly, most of the major critical thinkers whose work provides a framework for the study of contemporary media (Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Ernesto Laclau, Homi K. Bhabha and Judith Butler) have actually paid little serious attention to media culture at all (even if some have engaged with the philosophy of technology).² In books such as *The Mode of Information* (1990), *The Second Media Age* (1995), *What's the Matter with the Internet?* (2001) and *Information Please* (2006), Poster has gone to great lengths to counter this theoretical shortcoming by showing how *different media*—print, film, television, the Internet—constitute and organise culture and society in the West *differently*.

Nowhere is this message conveyed more interestingly and with more force, however, than in his essay introducing Flusser's *Does Writing Have a Future?* (2011) and *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (2011). In this relatively short essay Poster is able to demonstrate that,

For Flusser, writing as a medium encourages a specific form of temporality. The medium and the character of time are particular. This suggests that each medium might have an associated, special form of temporality. Flusser's media theory thereby accounts for the specificity of each information technology. His view contrasts sharply with Derrida's view in the sense the latter understands the temporal logic of writing as paradigmatic for all media – indeed, for all technology. As a result, deconstruction has difficulty distinguishing between media cultures such as between writing cultures and image cultures. Bernard Stiegler finds fault with Derrida on precisely these grounds.... (Poster,

‘Introduction’, xv-xvi)

Nevertheless, for all the emphasis Poster places here and elsewhere on the *specificity of different media cultures*, including that of globally networked digital information machines, a number of questions remain. For if the subject and its consciousness is continually being shaped by media technologies which all have ‘distinctly different forms of temporality’—writing, the photographic image, the Internet and so on—does this not risk ontologising or essentialising these distinctly different media (see Poster, ‘Introduction’, xviii)? *How different* are these media, we may ask?

There is also the question of what form we can understand the subject and its consciousness to take if, as is the case nowadays, its temporality is continually being shaped by different media technologies. As Poster himself makes clear, in the space of just one day the contemporary subject might quite easily work at a computer, listen to the radio, ride a bicycle, read a book, and watch television while sending a tweet. So it is not a case of *either* writing *or* television, but of both, along with photography, radio, the Internet and more. If, as he maintains, ‘the different cultural forms of media and time would each have their own validity’, does this mean that one discrete medium and temporality—and thus one construction of temporality in the subject—eventually becomes dominant, with that temporality associated with email, blogs, Web pages, social networks, mobile apps and augmented reality being in the process of replacing that of the analogue image, which has itself replaced that of writing and the text for Flusser (‘Introduction’, xix)? In which case, will the result be, as Poster suggests in one of his earlier books, a self that, strictly speaking, ‘is no longer a subject since it no longer subtends the world as if from outside but operates within a machine apparatus as a point in a circuit’ (*What’s the Matter*, 16)? Or will the ‘critical question of how to institute the newer relation’ between human and machine ‘in networked computing... remain an open political question’ (Poster, ‘Introduction’, xix)? Alternatively, do we need to develop a more diffuse, complex, fluid, antagonistic, mixed and heterogeneous notion of culture and society, with different discrete (and equally valid) media continuing to struggle and compete with each other for dominance with regard to their ability to ‘construct subjects, define identities, position individuals, and configure cultural objects’ (Poster, ‘Introduction’, xxiv)? If the latter is the case, does the subject experience multiple human-machine assemblages, temporalities and validities as a consequence, and with them perhaps multiple forms of consciousness; or even the kind of ‘hybrid production of subjectivity’ that Poster associates with Gilles Deleuze’s control societies thesis, at least as it is read by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (‘Introduction’, xxi)?³

Moreover, like Stiegler before him, is Poster not arguing for a generalised—rather than a specific—(media) technicity, not least as a condition of temporality? Even within that overall argument, might Poster’s own theory concerning the continual shaping of the subject’s temporality by different media cultures not be said to itself experience a certain degree of difficulty when it comes to accounting for the technological specificity of media? For instance, he posits that

the cultural study of media is hampered by a philosophical tradition based on the *episteme* of the transcendental, unconditional, and contextless ‘I think’. From Kant (time as a synthetic a priori of reason) to Husserl (time as a feature of consciousness as it appears to thought), and even to Bergson (time as duration), the nature of time is deduced from logic. A change comes with Derrida and the association of time with the technology of writing, but here again, writing becomes a form (*différance*) inherent to all media and thereby divorced from technological specificity and social practice. (‘Introduction’, xvii-xviii)

To be sure, Poster’s argument has the effect of emphasising the importance of understanding the specificity of the temporal logic of networked computing as a media technology. But the specificity of that temporal

logic seems for him to be inherent to all networked computing. Poster may differentiate between writing, photography and electronic media as technologies, but there is relatively little sense of the marked differences between particular platforms, software, formats and so on within the overall general category of electronic media. Are Poster's own examples of media in this essay not themselves to a degree 'contextless' and 'transcendental', then, at least to the extent that they too are largely divorced from social practice, including accounts of—or (critical self-reflexive awareness of their) performance in—particular situations, instances and experiences of media technology?

Furthermore, could we not include in this lack of attention to specificity, context and social practice the very media technology with which Poster—like Flusser, Derrida, and Stiegler (not to mention Foucault, Lyotard, Laclau, Bhabha, Butler *et al.*)—is most clearly engaged, and to which his consciousness is presumably tied most tightly, namely *writing, the text and the print-on-paper codex book*? How significant is it that Poster continues to use the technology of the *print-on-paper* codex book and the associated written forms of presentation and debate to try to tell us something about the specificity of networked digital information machines? To quote Flusser:

What is distinctive about writing? What sets it apart from comparable gestures of the past and future—from painting, from pressing on computer keys?

These are simple questions only at first glance. A comprehensive book would be required to grasp them all. But the crux of the matter is that such a book would still be a book. Instead of what? That is the question. (*Writing*, 4)

It is for this reason that *The Post-Secret State: Openness and Transparency in the Era of Gov 2.0* is offered here without an accompanying *explanatory written text* of any kind, other than this short commentary on media specificity and its possible enactments. For it is with some of the ways in which we might *begin* to speculate on the implications of Flusser's question for critical theory—how it is created, developed, performed and disseminated—that the *Liquid Theory TV* series is experimenting.

Notes

1. See, for example, Hayles, *Machines* and 'Print is Flat'; and Fuller, *Blip*. For an argument in favour of moving from an analysis of media specificity to an analysis of media singularity, see Hall, *Digitize*, 158-66 and 208-15. [#back](#)
2. Poster names Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Lyotard, Habermas, Laclau, Bhabha and Butler as being among those 'major theorists from the 1970s onwards who either paid no attention at all to the vast changes in media culture taking place under their noses or who commented on the media only as a tool that amplified other institutions like capitalism or representative democracy', with the Deleuze of 'Postscript on Control Societies', along with Vilém Flusser, Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Harold Innis and Hans Magnus Enzensberger all being identified as notable exceptions to this general rule (Poster, 'Introduction', xi). [#back](#)
3. For more on Deleuze's control societies thesis, see the second episode of *Liquid Theory TV*. [#back](#)

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